

Abstract:

Clothed, naked or bathrobed? How grammatical portraits evolve through time

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As typology extends the languages it samples, many are covered by single descriptive grammars, and many of these, in turn, are based on a fairly concentrated documentary window, at least by the standards of a well-known language like French or Japanese. This might, typically, be fieldwork stints totally 1-2 years during a PhD program or postdoc, perhaps followed by a couple more fieldtrips as part of other projects. In this talk I address the question of how a more slowly paced engagement with the language might modify the portrait offered by the sort of description written after a briefer period. I will base it largely on my own experiences working on three Australian languages – Kayardilt, Bininj Kunwok and Dalabon – over a period of three to four decades. Though I had rather different fieldwork profiles with each language, in all three cases I have returned many times to the task, and have been able to benefit in some cases from the more detailed studies carried out by my doctoral students and other collaborators (particularly Janet Fletcher, Alexandra Marley, Maia Ponsonnet, Bella Ross, and Erich Round). And in each case this has brought changes to our understanding of how the language works.

Among the case studies I will examine here are

(a) for Kayardilt, the nature of causative and applicative constructions, the discovery of some missing cells in the verb and interrogative paradigms, and issues regarding the best analysis of ‘modal case’, a rare phenomenon by which mood, tense and aspect are marked by an outer layer of case-like suffixes on non-subject NPs, as well as on the verb itself

(b) for Bininj Kunwok, the revelation of vastly more variation in the paradigmatic syncretism of divalent verb prefixes than had been suspected in earlier studies, and its relevance for whether number marking there should be analysed as an absolute or a minimal/augmented system

(c) for Dalabon, I likewise focus on two aspects of the pronominal prefix system: (i) the best analysis of the ‘harmonic vs disharmonic’ contrast, first analysed by Alpher (1982) as reflecting kinship relations between entities denoted by the pronoun but now revealed to be much more semantically polyvalent, (ii) ‘prosodic detachment’ of what are historically verb prefixes, which for some speakers become free-standing words or enclitics to preceding material, running in the opposite direction to the norms of grammaticalisation

Woven through these considerations of grammatical and phonological analysis I will consider the way different kinds of data-gathering, which for me have included work on Native Title claims and the documentation of artistic and musical traditions, and work on language reclamation, as well as more narrowly linguistic work including typological protocols, has played in uncovering typological features that had not been evident in early fieldwork.

I conclude by asking how typology, but also the publication of reference materials, can best incorporate this ‘evolving portrait’ feature of grammatical descriptions.